Chapter Two

Moral Awareness and the Dynamics of Self-Deception

Everyone, at times, exhibits a tendency to avoid, deny, rationalize or in some manner evade aspects of the truth about themselves and the social world in which they live. Such a tendency impedes moral development, spiritual transformation and positive social change. To live authentically and meet the pressing social problems facing society with moral courage requires watching. Self-deception can represent a major impediment to the emergence and/or operation of moral awareness even in a life praxis dedicated to the development of a more just and humane society. Self-deception can prove a subtle destroyer to those seeming to be wise. To avoid self-delusion and self-inflicted deceit causing mental duplicity, it is necessary to know and understand the workings of these enemies of moral awareness.

A similar core social psychological dynamic operates both with *self-deception* and *identity formation*, namely, the manipulation of consciousness through the selective focusing of attention. These dynamics of knowing can create moral disorder by corrupting consciousness and distorting identity. Thankfully, these negative factors can be identified and neutralized. A basic commitment to be rigorously honest with oneself to attain and maintain a clearer awareness of the structures of defence and denial operating within consciousness is the mark of a dynamic spiritual life, and the surest means to transformative moral awareness.

Self-deception can be viewed as a sustained mental process of limiting *awareness*. The non-performance of human consciousness is at the centre of the dynamics of self-deception. The factors that explain the phenomenon of self-deception also point to the psychological and moral conditions, wisdom, and skills required to bring about liberation from debilitating states of self-deception.[1]

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[1] The political and cultural significance of self-deception will be addressed in the following chapter.

1. Moral Approaches to Self-Deception

No simple definition of the term self-deception exists to make the phenomenon any less perplexing. The most any definition can do is to offer a general description of what happens when an individual deceives him or herself. There is a tendency to think of self-deception as *lying to oneself*. Upon closer scrutiny, however, *lying to oneself* is an intrinsically paradoxical enterprise. Deceiving oneself entails persuading oneself to hold a false belief to be true. It involves concealing a truth, or one's view of the truth, from oneself. But is this possible? How can a person simultaneously *believe* and *disbelieve* the same thing, while apparently remaining *unaware* of the fact that his or her consciousness and life experience is marked by this basic contradiction?

The enigmatic character of self-deception has prompted philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists, psychiatrists and ethicists to probe the complex dynamics of self-deception in search of a deeper understanding of the human condition. Each discipline has approached the topic with its own unique set of assumptions, perspectives and aims.

The *philosophical* problem has been to explain when false beliefs constitute a state of self-deception, and how self-deceivers generate and maintain these false beliefs. How do we, in the first place, determine what is true or false, rational or irrational, reality or fantasy? What is the nature and function of the human mind? Is the essential self a *unitary* or *fragmented* being? These are the questions philosophers have wrestled with when considering the seemingly paradoxical phenomenon of self deception.

The *psychological* problem has been to examine the structure and workings of human cognition in an attempt to explain the underlying motivation, implicit meaning and psychic dynamics of self-deception. Psychiatrists, psychologists and psychoanalysts strive to determine whether occasions of self-deception constitute particular mental illnesses or psychological disorders.

The *ethical* problem of self-deception has, for the most part, been to attain a correct understanding of the intentions and character of the self-deceiver, from a moral

point of view, to judge correctly whether - or to what extent - self-deceivers act immorally. The problem most often posed by ethicists writing on the theme of self-deception has been to determine the circumstances, factors and parameters which justify holding self-deceivers responsible for their actions.

In his book *Self Deception and Morality*, Mike W. Martin reviews an impressive body of literature on self-deception to discover whether others have found self-deceivers to be *innocent victims, culpable*, or somehow both *innocent and culpable*:

> *Are self-deceivers perhaps more like innocent victims than like perpetrators of deceit and, as such, deserving of compassion and help? Or, paradoxically, are they best viewed with ambivalence: culpable as deceivers and simultaneously innocent as victims of deception?*[2]

Martin discerns four general philosophical currents in the literature which he names the *inner hypocrisy, authenticity, moral ambiguity*, and *vital lie* approaches. Each explanation of self-deception contains a distinct ethical theory. Outlining the basic elements of the particular *philosophical world view* and *ethical theory of self-deception* found in each approach provides a useful framework for further reflection on what constitutes an appropriate ethical response to the perplexing human phenomenon of self-deception.

1.1 Self-Deception as Moral Hypocrisy

Writers in this intellectual stream regard self-deceivers as moral wrong-doers who betray themselves and cause harm to others. They regard self-deception as a *second-order wrong*. In other words, individuals engage in self-deceit to cover and cloud *first-order* immoral behaviour. Martin cites Bishop James Butler as a leading proponent of this view. Butler believed that self-deceit allows moral conscience to be put to sleep, enabling an individual to engage in wrongdoing with less pain.

The inner hypocrisy approach adopts a metaphysical world view with a normative ethical system. An appeal is made to absolute moral principles and rules. Everyone has an

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[2]   Mike W. Martin, *Self-deception and Morality* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1986), p. 2.

inner moral light, a *conscience* - so the reasoning goes - and is therefore culpable for self-deceived behaviour. Why? Because self-deceivers choose to ignore what they know to be true, for the explicit purpose of lessening the pain and guilt of continuing a course of action they themselves believe to be immoral or sinful.

1.2 Self-Deception as Non-authentic Living

Those adopting the authenticity philosophical approach tend to emphasize a single ethical ideal, *authenticity*, which is defined in terms of living honestly and avoiding self-deception. This view is based on existential philosophical principles which explain self-deception as the mental consequence of a refusal to deal responsibly with the whole of one's life.

Sören Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre are the most prominent and best-known representatives of this approach. Both recognized the need for individuals to have a conscious sense of personal responsibility toward life and made this focus the foundation of their philosophical approach. Authenticity means facing and accepting responsibility for what is *known to be true*. These two existentialists differed, however, in their belief on what constitutes relevant significant truth. Kierkegaard held that authenticity requires the goal of achieving full individuality and personal uniqueness, based on moral commitments and a relationship with God. Sartre rejected belief in objective values and God's existence, charging that such beliefs are themselves the products of self-deception. For Sartre the only true virtue was faithfulness to the fundamental fact of personal freedom. In either case, self-deception for both writers is not restricted to matters of moral right and wrong; when we deceive ourselves, we corrupt human awareness and moral praxis.

1.3 Self-Deception as Vital Lies to the Self

Those belonging to the vital lie approach regard self-deception as a valuable coping technique, or psychological defense mechanism, which shields the self from unbearable realities and debilitating truths. Self-deception is viewed as serving a valuable *function* in the maintenance and construction of identity, protecting the individual from unpleasant and painful aspects of reality. This approach takes exception to the excessively moralistic condemnations of self-deceivers found within the preceding two approaches, and focuses on the positive benefits of self-deception. It draws attention to the possible harm which can result from trying to eliminate self-deception completely from our lives, or the lives of others: engaging in self-deception can also contribute to personal growth, self-respect, love and community.

Unlike the *stoic*, who regards moral virtues as *good in themselves*, proponents of the vital lie approach regard self-deception as *morally-neutral*. They believe the moral dimension of self-deception must be assessed in terms of concrete life contexts examined in light of the principles of a *situation* ethic.[3] The ethical notion of *the good* in this approach, is based neither on an implicit nor explicit objective code of moral truth. It is derived, rather, from a *situational* and *utilitarian* ethic which regards *survival*, not *truth*, as the most valued ideal. The vital lie approach does not suggest that self-deception is always the right policy, but argues that it may sometimes be the honourable and prudent route, whenever engaging in self-deception is deemed to be the only way to maintain a viable human life.

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[3] Joseph Fletcher clarifies the foundational ethical position upon which the vital lie approach is based when he states that the situational ethicist, ". . . avoids words like 'never' and 'perfect' and 'always' and 'complete' as he [she] avoids the plague, as he [she] avoids 'absolutely.' " *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia, WestMinster Press), p. 43-44.

1.4 The Moral Ambiguity of Self-Deception

The moral ambiguity approach regards self-deceivers as victims of forces beyond their independent conscious control, thereby calling into question whether conduct is completely voluntary. Martin discerns two distinct branches within the moral ambiguity approach. The first trend subscribes to some form of philosophical determinism where the self-deceiver is regarded as having neither full knowledge nor free choice over what he or she thinks or does. Where awareness of wrongdoing is completely absent, moral culpability for self-deceived thinking and acting is ambiguous.

, The second branch of the moral ambiguity approach engages in a psychoanalytic reading of self-deceivers, viewing self-deception as the result of unconscious forces. Freud is considered the originator of this view:

> *The most sustained effort to overcome this seeming paradox [of self-deception] has been that of psychoanalysis. Its view of human defense mechanisms is surely much more complex than the standard versions of self-deception. Freud's therapy was based on the assumption that people repress much of what they seem not to know, or to have forgotten, and that this material is capable of being retrieved.*[4]

Proponents of this approach adopt a morally non-judgmental approach by suggesting that it is only proper to hold people accountable if they have an awareness of moral responsibility, and show a genuine willingness to accept responsibility. Such a disposition seems lacking in self-deceivers. Self-deception is, consequently, viewed as a type of pre-moral condition in which the absence of awareness and free choice makes moral responsibility uncertain. This approach probes the complexities of the human psyche in an attempt to show how theoretical models of moral evaluation fail to give proper attention to psychological dynamics.

Despite noticeable differences between the various representatives of the four general approaches, we notice that three of the four ethical approaches render *moral judgments* on self-deceivers: only the moral ambiguity approach regards the behaviour of self-deceivers as *morally opaque*.

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[4] Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Revelation* (New York: Pantheon books, 1982), p. 61.

2. Judging the Intentions and Character of Self-Deceivers

In his research on self-deception, Martin found the tendency to present characterizations and judgements on people deemed to be self-deceivers so prevalent in the literature that he made it the primary interpretative device for his study:

> *Regarded as deceivers, self-deceivers seem guilty for their deception and any harmful effects; regarded as deceived, they seem to be innocent victims. Viewed as liars, they appear insincere and dishonest; viewed as victims of a lie, they appear sincere and honestly mistaken. As deceivers, they seem responsible and blameworthy for cowardly hypocrisy; as deceived, they apparently deserve compassion and help in gaining full awareness of the guile perpetrated on them.[5]*

A non-judgmental moral theory of self-deception can be constructed from the psychological insights in the writings of several representatives of the moral ambiguity approach. First, further analysis of the ethical theories informing the moral judgments launched against self-deceivers in the other three approaches to understand better how these views are both untenable, and how they preempt moral awareness by making judgments abstracted from the reality of the person's situation.

2.1 Inner Hypocrisy Characterization: Self-deceiver as Sinner

Representative viewpoints within the inner hypocrisy approach hold that individuals perform *acts* of self-deception to create mental *shrouds* that block awareness of immoral behaviour in consciousness - the attention is deliberately kept focussed on something else. Moral wrongdoing results from the person failing to believe that a given act is morally wrong, while still holding to the basic moral principle which makes the act morally wrong. It's a case of convincing oneself that the act *is morally right*, despite evidence available to one's consciousness that says the contrary. With self-deception, that awareness is prevented from being constructed, or it is somehow obliterated if present, as a consequence of psychosocial factors affecting the life and consciousness of the person.

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[5]   Martin, *Self-deception and Morality*, p. 28-29.

The dynamic works as follows: a person first thinks a certain act is, in principle, morally wrong, but then proceeds to deceive him/herself through any number of means into believing that - despite the violation of the moral principle - the act is nonetheless permissable. This view serves as the basis for the judgment of hypocrite.

Such an atomized assessment of moral behaviour is always a potentially misleading abstraction. It is not possible to characterize an individual's behaviour - let alone judge it - without knowing the *intention* and *life context* of the individual performing the act. Besides being *personal*, human actions are also always *social*, and they only become intelligible when they are viewed within a historical and narrative frame of reference.

Writers belonging to the inner hypocrisy approach believe they know the meaning of self-deceived behaviour; they claim to know both the intentions and the identity of the self-deceiver. The intentions of the self-deceiver are (a) to act in violation of what one knows to be right in order to please oneself, even at the expense of others, and (b) to shirk the burden of moral responsibility and moral guilt. The claim is that the individual has (or had) knowledge of right and wrong but freely chose to blur this painful and self-condemning knowledge for the intentions cited above.

Is such a general moral assessment justified? Such would be the case if no other intention could be found to explain self-deceived behaviour, thereby making no other characterization of the self-deceiver possible. Others have, however, as was noted, ascribed quite different intentions and characterizations to self-deceivers.

2.2 Self-deceiver as Coward: The Authenticity Approach

Kierkegaard offered a description of the intentions and characterization of self-deceivers from the vantage point of his objective code of moral values and his fundamental Christian theology. He believed that sin was facilitated by a self-deceptive blurring of consciousness. To be a self-deceiver is to be a *sinner* and a *betrayer of self.* Kierkegaard offers a less harsh analysis of the dynamics of self-deception than does the inner hypocrisy approach, however, believing that most people are simply too far removed from God to

have much awareness of themselves as sinners. The self-deceiver suffers from a weak spirit, and too little moral courage. The self-betrayed sinner lacks consciousness and spirit, and consequently, does not warrant the description and malicious characterization attributed generally by those who follow the general ethical theory in the inner hypocrisy approach. For Kierkegaard, self-deception is a psychological state of moral identity defined by a deformation in consciousness and the human spirit.

Sartre made a slightly harsher judgement. He believed that to deny one's authentic freedom is to be self-deceived. Only *authentic* people can identify and judge self-deceivers. On the other hand, there is no objective basis for criticizing *authentic* persons, in that truly authentic individuals consistently regard human freedom as the foundation of all other values. And how is one to judge between *authentic* and *unauthentic* individuals? Sartre found grounds for judging self-deceivers in his concept of *bad faith*. He believed that *authentic* persons can form judgments on those who seek to hide from themselves the voluntary nature of their existence and its complete freedom. To turn away from or deny the fact of one's own freedom is to act with bad faith. People may do so for various reasons. Sartre judged those who evaded moral responsibility by believing in determinism to be *cowards*, and those who ". . . try to show that their existence is necessary, when it is merely an accident of the appearance of the human race on earth," he judged even more severely, with the derogatory designation "scum." Sartre was careful to point out that, ". . . neither cowards nor scum can be identified except on the plane of strict authenticity."[6]

Adherents of both the inner hypocrisy and authenticity approaches offer negative characterizations of self-deceivers based on fundamental religious and/or philosophical belief systems containing moral principles and values which they hold to be universally available to human beings.

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[6] Martin, *Self-deception and Morality*, p. 65.

2.3 Self-deceiver as Survivor: The Vital Lie Approach

The vital lie approach demonstrates that it is also possible to give a positive characterization to the self-deceiver. Adherents of this approach regard the self-deceiver as *prudent*, or even *heroic*. Whatever the particular characterization given, individuals who engage in self-deception with the intention of furthering their own survival - or the survival of others - are to be commended for increasing the viability of life. This ethical perspective is founded on neither an *evidence-based* nor *truth-centred* pattern of rationality, but on a utilitarian mode of reasoning for ethics and a practical theory of human development.

The particular intentions ascribed to self-deceivers by the inner hypocrisy, authenticity and vital lie moral approaches are based neither on concrete historical data, nor specific biographical information; each characterization is either *inferred* or *deduced* from the underlying philosophical beliefs systems and ethical theories operating in each approach. There can therefore be no verification of any moral theory of self-deception based on an abstract analysis of human intention. The most a general theory can do is to outline a typology of *possible* characterizations, based on the variety of particular experiences of individuals. The contextual experience of the self-deceiver can be morally assessed only after the discovery or disclosure of a sufficient degree of significant information to make such self-deceived experience intelligible within a narrative framework. It is never acceptable to render moral judgments (*positive* or *negative*) on self-deceivers as a class or group.

No clear verification can be found for the particular ethical understanding of self-deception found in either the inner hypocrisy, authenticity or vital lie streams. This leaves us with one remaining option: to develop a non-judgmental understanding of the social psychological dynamics of self-deception, beginning with insights from a more general literature supportive of the moral ambiguity approach to understanding and responding to the self-deception.

3. Self-Deceiver as a Metaphor for the Human Condition

Research on self-deception has tended to focus on the abstract problem of determining culpability for self-deceived behaviour. Within this approach, researchers look for whatever they believe will help to establish a set of working criteria to determine under what circumstances moral responsibility for self-deception exists. When is it appropriate to hold others morally accountable for self-deception? The tendency to assess culpability for self-deception relies on the prevalence of the dominant epistemology discussed in the preceding chapter. It is the *problem-solving* approach to ethics: the problem here being to ascertain guilt. As John Martin Rich notes, however, this widespread tendency within ethics fails to appreciate the complex social psychological dynamics of moral action, and has, consequently, tended to overlook the more fundamental problem of determining the extent to which a person may be rendered *powerless* to act in accordance with cherished moral values:

> *Belief systems do not clarify what is actually entailed in moral decision and "moral development". That is to say, popular crises in morality have tended to divert energies away from more critical and fundamental inquiry into human nature, both human capabilities and limitations. Any fair assessment of moral accountability requires that the human being be capable of doing that for which he [she] is judged.*[7]

This means that it is appropriate to view self-deception as a metaphor to understand the human condition better. But how are we to understand self-deception in the particular? We can all attach a particular face to the concept *self-deceiver* - perhaps an alcoholic brother who flatly denies that he has a drinking problem when confronted with overwhelming evidence to the contrary, or a patient who has no conscious recollection of news that he or she has a terminal disease only days after being told. How are we to understand and characterize such individuals? Are they liars? Moral cowards? Suffering from some mental disorder? Or for some obscure reason, simply unable to face the truth about their situation?

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[7] John Martin Rich et al. *Theories of Moral Development* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, Publisher, 1985), p. 3.

In those many cases where self-deception and denial is associated with addiction the overwhelming conclusion of both the medical establishment, twelve-step recovery programs, and the general population is that self-deception and denial are integral elements of some mental illness or disease.[8] The danger in characterizing an individual as *mentally ill* or *diseased* is that such judgments may be based on partial and perhaps completely erroneous information. A great deal of attention must be given to all the details of the individual's entire life experience in order to understand concrete experiences of self-deception.

Concepts such as *self-deception, split self, bad faith, false consciousness* and *defense mechanisms* are compelling metaphors. They point to internal conflicts and self-imposed defeats that we recognize as potentially debilitating. As Sissela Bok emphasizes, however, metaphors are only metaphors.

> *We cannot easily do without these metaphors; the danger comes when we begin to take them for explanations. As metaphors, they help us to see the paradoxes of human failure to perceive and react; as explanations of how the paradoxes are overcome, they short-circuit understanding and become misleading in their own right - one more way in which we avoid trying to understand the complexity that underlies our experience of paradox. They function then as what I.A. Richards called 'premature ultimates,' bringing inquiry to an end too suddenly.[9]*

The moment we equate a *metaphor* with an *explanation*, we block the development of awareness. When we attach a metaphor to an individual as a label, we wrongly judge that individual, which may prevent us from ever getting to know the real person, and perhaps - if the individual happens to trust and believe our judgment - we may prevent that person from getting to know him or herself better. Unsubstantiated characterizations or *labels*, offer simplified explanations which often bring a necessary and moreinsightful process of self-reflection or clinical diagnosis to an abrupt end : investigations which would likely, in time, bring to the surface core problems or

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[8]   The notion that addictions are *diseases* in the medical sense of the term is problematic. Chapter four considers some of the negative impacts on moral awareness and human development that can be caused from characterizing individuals suffering from addictions, or various forms of neurotic or psychotic behaviour, as *diseased.*

[9]   Bok, *Secrets*, p. 64.

unresolved conflicts - conflicts which may make intelligible the social origin and psychological function of addiction, neurosis, and psychosis in the individual's life. Detecting and understanding the source of these conflicts is needed to understand how social contradictions operate in human consciousness, distort and debilitate moral living, and frustrate legitimate human needs.

An ethics of awareness seeks to discover what has interrupted or blocked moral transformation, and to offer ways and means to prevent or escape such pitfalls. The following three sections consider the subtle workings of the human mind in terms of a common human propensity to deal with the harshness of reality, at certain times, under certain circumstances, by deadening awareness.

The most important moral problem concerning self-deception is not the need to determine how to judge culpability, a much more fundamental moral problem stems from the simple fact that self-deception exists. Even if it was possible to determine culpability, we need to ask what is gained by confronting the self-deceiver and holding him or her responsible? What possible good would simple knowledge be to ourselves or to the self-deceiver if the initial knowledge of right was not sufficient to motivate the self-deceiver to act morally in the first place?

> *When philosophers refer to 'the problem of weakness of will' and the problem of self-deception', they usually have in mind the question how these phenomena are at all possible....When non-philosophers refer to these problems, they are more likely to have in mind the question how weakness of will and self-deception can be overcome.*[10]

The ambiguity approach holds that self-deception occurs either because of an *unwillingness* or *inability* on the part of individuals to face certain painful and threatening truths. What does it take to confront these frightful aspects of life? Is it even a wise thing to try to do so? Before providing an answer to these fundamental questions, it is important to recognize that whatever the appropriate response to self-deception might be, it is unfair to assume that self-deception is solely the responsibility of a given individual. I agree with Joseph Culliton's observation that,

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[10]   Jon Elster, *The Multiple Self* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 6.

Most of us are conscious of the fact that we cannot transform ourselves simply by being made aware of our faults. Nor are we capable of experiencing sorrow for our failures, simply because they are revealed to us.[11]

If individuals should have been loved and encouraged by others, and they were not, they may lack the ability to initiate self-transformation. They may still be waiting to be encouraged to strive for something; they may need to see someone else's faith in them, if their faith in themselves has waned. The correct stance to be taken vis-a-vis self-deception, until finding evidence to justify a different stance, is obviously to regard the alleged self-deceiver as a person in need of compassion and help, keeping ever in mind that we are more than likely not free from having purposely evaded significant aspects of truth in our own lives.

3.1 Consensus on the Core Phenomenon of Self-Deception

The *inner hypocrisy, authenticity, vital lie,* and *ambiguity* approaches agree that the dynamic process of self-deception tends to follow a certain course. An individual evades aspects of what is known to be true to feel better while acting contrary to what he or she values and knows to be true. To accomplish this, the individual utilizes various psychological techniques which (a) help the person ignore, repress, or distort true values, and (b) help the person think of, or manufacture, reasons which justify the self-deceived course of action.[12] In all cases, the individual deliberately turns attention away from those features of his or her behaviour that make it wrong. *Wrong* is here defined as whatever a person thinks or does contrary to what he or she truly values and desires to do *ideally*. Why do we act against our own judgment and cherished moral beliefs by engaging in self-

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[11] Joseph T. Culliton. *Presence: It Effects on Honesty and Truthfulness* (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1985), p. 91.

[12] There are numerous ways in which this can happen. According to Martin, self-deceivers might (a) evade understanding by blurring their own grasp of what they know, (b) evade attention through systematic distraction, (c) evade belief via wilful ignorance or rationalization, (d) evade cogent argument by disregarding evidence, discounting relevant facts, or refusing to let oneself see clearly what follows from what, or (e) evade appropriate action using self-pretence or any of the preceding strategies, *Self-Deception and Morality*, p. 15.

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deception? Perhaps because we sense that something unpleasant would be uncovered if we exercised our attention, reasoning, or information-gathering skills in a certain direction. To avoid pain, we engage in awareness-avoidance tactics.

The primary motivation preceding the entrance into self-deception is the avoidance of truth - the acknowledgement of which would result in a troublesome awareness and an experience of painful feelings. The *inner hypocrisy* approach explains self-deception as an attempt to evade self-acknowledgement of moral wrongdoing to avoid painful moral emotions: guilt and remorse for harming others; shame for betraying moral ideals; and self-contempt for not meeting moral commitments. The *authenticity* approach explains how self-deception enables the moral and spiritual self to betray itself by refusing to acknowledge - with varying degrees of awareness - its own particular potentials, limitations, realistic options and actual characteristics, to avoid either the painful awareness of human *limits*, or the difficult decisions and challenges resulting from an acknowledgement of human *potentiality*. This approach offers the insight that self-deception can easily take the form of self-deprecation as a result of an unwillingness or inability to appreciate the fundamental dignity of being human, and having valuable talents and intrinsic worth. As Martin notes: "People who display drastically low estimates of themselves, suffering from inferiority complexes, may do so because of self-deception about their own positive attributes and self-worth."[13]

The *vital lie* approach also recognizes that self-deception serves to shield the person from those painful feelings which would accompany the acknowledgement of harsh realities and *debilitating* truths.

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[13] Martin, *Self-deception and Morality*, p. 46.

3.2 Psychic Numbing as Coping Strategy

Psychologists have pointed to a particular phenomenon which often occurs when human beings are subjected to considerable pain or stress. Individuals employ psychological mechanisms of defense which protect themselves from the negative feelings which stress produce, whenever the sources of stress are *kept in mind*. Psychological defence mechanisms are used to minimize or destroy such awareness.

Robert Jay Lifton, who studied the survivors of Hiroshima and other disasters, refers to these techniques and mechanisms as tools individuals use in a process of *psychic numbing*. In his book *People of the Lie*, Scott Peck discusses how psychic numbing is a typical and usually quite normal human response:

> *It is a simple sort of thing. The sight of a single bloody, mangled body horrifies us. But if we see such bodies all around us every day, day after day, the horrible becomes normal and we lose our sense of horror. We simply tune it out. Our capacity for horror becomes blunted. We no longer truly 'see' the blood or 'smell' the stench or 'feel' its agony. Unconsciously we have become anaesthetized.*[14]

This virtually automatic recourse to psychic numbing intrigued psychiatrist Victor Frankl. While imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz, Frankl observed how the prisoners denied themselves explicit awareness of the surrounding horror to deaden the pain of camp life, maintain sanity, and to survive: "Cold curiosity predominated even in Auschwitz, somehow detaching the mind from its surroundings, which came to be regarded with a kind of objectivity. At that time one cultivated this state of mind as a means of protection."[15] Far from being morally reprehensible, Frankl considered such a process of *awareness deadening* to be a necessary mechanism of survival. Only in this way could morale be maintained, and limited supplies of courage and energy be channelled into the all-important task of, ". . . preserving one's own life and

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[14] Scott Peck, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 1983), p. 221.

[15] Victor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1959), p. 25.

that of the other fellow."[16]

These experiences which Peck and Frankl discuss, make the process of psychic numbing more understandable. The moral significance of this psychological process is not always so innocent, however, and others have drawn our attention to how we can undergo a similar process of *desensitization* without necessarily being subjected to *horrific* images or experiences. Psychologist Charlotte Kasl explains how the same underlying psychological dynamics operating in experiences of psychic numbing such as those described by Peck and Frankl, can easily be manipulated by others, with disastrous moral and political consequences:

> *Images that pair merchandise with sexual arousal and fulfilment are everywhere. And images lie to us. To protect ourselves from the meaning of women-hating ads, we all engage in psychic numbing, a term originally used to describe our massive cultural denial to the threat of the nuclear holocaust, the most extreme form of self-abuse.*[17]

Others have argued that psychic numbing can occur on a widespread scale without clear reference to either *horrific* images, which bring immediate emotional pain (*Peck and Frankl*), nor *pleasant* images, which distort reality and foster selfish and abusive attitudes and practices (*Kasl*). According to Philip Wexler, in his book *Critical Social Psychology*, members of society avoid the anxiety and confusion which accompanies *becoming* aware, or *remaining* aware, of social contradictions by deadening awareness: "Reified social relations create the psychological conditions for the development of schizophrenia. The majority of the population is spared from this madness only at the cost of numbing their awareness. Those who refuse to be numbed fall prey to the viciousness of the social labelling process."[18]

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[16] See Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, p. 44. Psychologists and social workers involved with survivors of incest and childhood sexual abuse discuss a similar process of psychic numbing. This form of psychic numbing can obviously have a far greater impact on an individual's identity. In some cases, the disassociation from the *reality* as a result of being brutally abused is radical enough to lead to multiple-personality disorders, where the individual survives by splitting or compartmentalizing psychic experience. More will be said about this in chapter four in the context of a discussion of negative dependency.

[17] Charlotte Kasl, *Women, Sex and Addiction: The Search for Love and Power* (New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 197.

[18] Philip Wexler, *Critical Social Psychology*, (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 124.

The following chapter makes the connections between social knowledge, ideology, and deadened awareness central to a study of social ignorance. I here refer to the relation between social context and deadened awareness as a reminder that what the moral agent *thinks* and *does* always has social and political significance.

3.3 Denial and the Psychic Mechanisms of Defense

Of all the responses that seem clearly self-deceptive, to many, denial is most striking. Doctors find, for example, that among seriously ill patients that learn that death is near, at least 20 percent have no memory after a few days of having received such news. Faced with intolerable anxiety, they have blocked out the news.[19]

Anna Freud's work *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, proposed a tremendously influential *theory of denial*. Various interpretations of this theory have become firmly entrenched in psychoanalysis and popular *self* and *group* therapy approaches. Interpretations of her theory not always remained true to her teaching.

Dr. Avery Wiseman believes Anna Freud gave the term denial a meaning which has since become confused with particular psychological defense mechanisms to such a degree that the foundational insight into the dynamic nature of denial has largely been lost. Anna Freud held that psychological defense mechanisms of all types are themselves grounded on a fundamental human response to danger; this response is what she termed *denial*. Here denial is presented as a metaphor for a human situation and process, it is not itself a *mechanism of defence*. We again come up against the seemingly inescapable tendency among professionals to transform metaphors into explanations: "In general, denial has been used as a fictitious 'mechanism,' an 'as if' entity that can be triggered promptly by a threatening event or perception, as well as a hypothetical 'explanation' for different kinds of psychopathology."[20]

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[19]   Bok, *Secrets*, p. 70.

[20]   Avery D. Weisman, M.D. *On Dying and Denying: A Psychiatric Study of Terminality* (New York: Behavioral Publications, Inc., 1972), p. 59.

A clear distinction must be made between the human *process* of denying and the *fact* of denial. Denial is not a *mechanism* nor is it an explanatory *concept*. Denial is something human beings *do*. As Dr. Weisman explains,

> *Denial is a total process of responding within a specific psychosocial context. Negation is only one of the consequences of this process; denial is a final fact, not the process itself. To confuse a total process with one of its defensive aims is like saying that the purpose of driving an automobile is to avoid accidents.*[21]

Weisman believes it is an error to view denial solely in terms of *aversion* and *negation* of something unpleasant. A dynamic interpretation of denial refuses to accept negation and aversion as static products of a process. They are, rather, incomplete interpretations of a variety of related acts. Weisman outlines four successive steps which precede the fact of denial: (a) acceptance of a primary and public field of perception, (b) repudiation of a portion of the shared meaning of that field, (c) replacement of the repudiated meaning with a more congenial version, and
(d) reorientation of the individual within the scope of the total meaning to accommodate the revised reality.

Why do human beings deny what they should acknowledge? Dr. Weisman believes there is a positive function to denial. He tells us that denial helps us to do away with a threatening portion of reality so that we may then participate more fully in contending with problems - a position similar to the vital lie moral response to self-deception. The challenge for ethicists is not to lose sight of the entire dynamic life process of the individual, continually recalling that *denial* is but *one* characterizing feature of a master life story.

The great insight Dr. Weisman offers into this perplexing process of denial is that the phenomenon is never simply an *intrapsychic* occurrence, but always takes place within the context of *interpersonal* relationships. Denial is selective thinking with the aim of evading painful knowledge; denial is also the manipulation of attention geared to protecting or enhancing self-esteem, positive identity and *value in relationships*:

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[21]   Weisman, *On Dying and Denying*, p. 60.

Although a potential danger is apt to evoke denial (as I shall call the combined act and fact), a common threatened danger is a jeopardized relationship with a significant key person. Hence, the purpose of denial is not simply to avoid a danger, but to prevent loss of a significant relationship. This explains why patients tend to deny more to certain people than to others.[22]

To grasp the psychological dynamics of denial, we need to consider what is *not taking place* when an individual is engaged in a process of denial: at the most basic level, we can simply say that he or she is not accepting (in the sense of *receiving*) aspects of experience into consciousness. What is meant by *not accepting* or not receiving experiences into consciousness? Not accepting signifies either an *unwillingness* or *inability* to attend to, and consciously avow, the inferred meaning of isolated statements, circumstances and events which are part of experience, and available naturally to consciousness.

Previous considerations on processes of psychic numbing and denial suggest why it may be necessary and prudent to accept certain experiences, memories, etc., into consciousness gradually, or, in certain cases, perhaps not to attend to them at all. Until acknowledgment is possible in a manner that leads to life-enhancing and meaningful consequences, individuals tend to drift in that vague mental space Dr. Weisman calls *middle knowledge*; a cognitive place somewhere between open acknowledgement and utter repudiation. To come to a full understanding of human denial it is probably wise to adopt Dr. Weisman's belief that, "The roots of denial are planted in the biological, social, and emotional soil of life, not in the rules of logic."[23] Further reflection on the dynamics of self-deception will make the apparent paradox less perplexing.

We can deaden our awareness of reality without necessarily engaging in self-deception. Insights from the writers cited reveal how it is possible to view self-deception as a common human experience where certain kinds of life experiences make self-deceptive mental strategies understandable, and in cases like those cited by Frankl, morally-legitimate. These reflections give a measure of credence to the *vital lie* approach.

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[22]   Weisman, *On Dying and Denying*, p. 63. Author's emphasis.

[23]   Weisman, *On Dying and Denying*, p. 66-67.

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What does it require to become willing or able to acknowledge truth and act on knowledge of moral *right*, thereby either overcoming or avoiding an engagement in self-deception? An answer to this basic question begins with key insights on the dynamics of self-deception found within the non-deterministic branch of the moral ambiguity approach.

4. The Ambiguity Approach: Collingwood, Fingarette, Burrell

The second branch of the moral ambiguity approach is concerned with how self-deception causes, constitutes, or manifests unhealthy adjustments to reality. Freud is considered to be the primary shaper of this approach. R. G. Collingwood and Herbert Fingarette developed related perspectives, holding that the presence of unconscious influences makes blameworthiness for self-deception ambiguous.

In his treatise, *The Principles of Art*, Collingwood presents his understanding of self-deception as *corrupt* or *false* consciousness. Collingwood believed consciousness to be the explicit awareness of our emotions and the specific object of our emotions. We may feel *bad*, but not be conscious of either the feeling or the origin or reason for the feeling. Through the linguistic or symbolic activity of consciousness, feelings are transformed into particular emotions coupled with corresponding ideas. It is in this way that we come to understand their meaning. We not only feel *bad*, but we come to understand our bad feeling as a particular emotion; *sad*, or *depressed*, or *lonely*, and we understand to what the emotion is connected (i.e., grieving the death of a loved one). Corrupt consciousness, on the other hand, is the mis-performance - or the purposeful non-performance of acts of expression within consciousness. Rather than diligently working to understand ourselves, we simply turn our attention elsewhere. In this way, self-deception can operate to deaden moral awareness.

Collingwood regards self-deceivers as attending only fleetingly and indistinctly to alarming feelings or impressions. The self-deceiver quickly turns attention away from the feeling, thereby avoiding developing the feeling into an idea or emotion. Self-deceivers do

not really know the truth they flee because, according to Collingwood, such self-knowledge entails consciousness. Self-deceivers corrupt their own consciousness at a level prior to the intellect's formation of beliefs. This results in a lack of explicit awareness within consciousness. Collingwood believes that to express feelings in consciousness is to affirm ownership of those feelings. To disown feelings is to corrupt consciousness. Disowning feelings can lead to a loss of control over them because they continue to exert an unsupervised influence for which the individual does not assume responsibility, nor likely even detect.[24] Collingwood does not classify corrupt consciousness as either an involuntary mishap or voluntary wrongdoing. It is the result of one's own activity, yet it is not exactly the product of a *choice*. He reserved such terms for activities initiated with full consciousness.

Collingwood's way of understanding and evaluating self-deception shares striking similarities with the approach Herbert Fingarette takes in his book *Self-Deception*. Prominent in both accounts are the ideas of psychological disowning, fear of being unable to psychologically integrate what is disowned, refusal to focus explicit attention on certain aspects of reality, rejection of personal responsibility and control, and the resultant moral ambiguity.

According to Fingarette, self-deceivers can be described as persuading themselves to believe what they know deep down, or *in their hearts*, to be false. Rather than grapple with the paradoxical problem of explaining how it is possible to *convince oneself that what one knows to be true is false*, Fingarette redescribed the phenomenon of self-deception. Instead of relying on such cognitive terms as *believe* and *know*, he used the language of action, volition and personal identity. Self-deceivers, he suggested, pursue engagements that they disavow - that is, they refuse to claim as part of their identity or self-image. To avow an engagement is to commit oneself to treating it as an aspect of oneself. In undertaking such identity-forming commitments, people authoritatively create their own sense of who they are. Self-deceivers, however, pursue engagements which are

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[24] Here we cannot help but recall a similar viewpoint from Max Scheler; a perspective which formed the basis of his now-famous philosophical/psychological treatise *Ressentiment*.

inconsistent with their avowed values, while simultaneously refusing to avow those engagements

Avowing an engagement[25] has two primary dimensions: (a) a willingness to focus explicit attention on the engagement, a process which Fingarette referred to as *spelling out*; and (b) the integration of the avowed engagement into the set of other avowed engagements that together constitute our identity from our own point of view. If an engagement conflicts with moral principles and values which the individual does indeed cherish, then avowing the engagement not only brings painful emotions such as anguish, guilt, or shame, it also confronts us with the need to reshape a new identity in the midst of inner turmoil - we suddenly realize that we are not who we thought we were and wanted to be. Self-deception enables us to pursue a disavowed engagement without having (a) to experience emotional turmoil and mental conflict, and (b) to reshape identity. Implicit in this view is a dynamic rather than static understanding of human consciousness. As David Burrell explains, consciousness is never automatic, but requires human agency and personal effort:

> *Our rudimentary view of consciousness as awareness will not suffice to offer a plausible account of self-deception. I can be conscious of what I am doing without perceiving myself doing it and I can be aware of what I am up to yet fail to take it into account. It would not be amiss to say that we must be trained to be conscious.*[26]

To act intentionally requires that we act knowingly; but this does not mean that to act intentionally we need to attend constantly to that knowledge. Burrell believes that self-deceiving forms of ignorance are most often spontaneous. The intentions involved are typically not deliberately thought about with mental concentration, nor are they attended to with any degree of awareness.

To become explicitly conscious of something requires exercising a certain skill. It is inaccurate to characterize consciousness as a kind of *mental mirror*. It is more the exercising of a learned skill where we spell out the features of the world to make sense of

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[25] Engagements can be an activity, purpose, emotion, perception, belief, experience, or any other aspect of how we discover, interpret, or take account of ourselves and the world around us.

[26] Burrell, *Self-deception*, p. 84-85.

experience. At times we all sense it to be a more reasonable policy not to spell out some of our engagements to others. At other times we do not spell out our engagements to ourselves. By adopting such a policy, however, we not only avoid becoming explicitly conscious of what we are doing, we also set up a situation ". . . that allows us to avoid becoming explicitly conscious that we are avoiding becoming explicitly conscious!"[27]

A distinctive orientation within psychoanalytic theory and clinical psychology reflects a similar view of human consciousness. William Glasser, the originator of *Reality Therapy*, challenges basic assumptions of conventional psychoanalysis by arguing that what is really below the level of consciousness are not obscure aspects of previous life experience, but rather, what the individual is doing *in the present*:

> *In a sense the patient is aware of his present behaviour, but it is only a meagre awareness. Incorrectly assuming that the patient is fully conscious of his present behaviour, the conventional therapist emphasizes the past; in so doing he misses the extent to which the patient lacks awareness of what he is doing now. The Reality Therapist insists that the patient face his present behaviour.*[28]

Psychiatrist Scott Peck offers a similar analysis of human consciousness when he suggests that individuals often deceive themselves and avoid dealing with many of the realities of life by remaining so busy thinking and talking about obsessions and compulsions, that no time is left to become aware of basic *problems* underlying more obvious *symptoms*.[29] Because *symptoms* often serve as *signs* for what we would rather not see, there is a similar tendency to *treat* or *annihilate* symptoms instead of facing them squarely to discover their meaning.

Proponents of this psychoanalytic approach offer important insights into the social psychological dynamics of human consciousness. A narrow - and at times - *exclusive* focus on the *present*, with an accompanying exclusion of the significance of both the *past* and the *future*, can certainly, however, create its own form of blindness.

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[27]   Burrell, *Self-deception*, p. 85.

[28]   William Glasser, *Reality Therapy: A New Approach to Psychiatry* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 55

[29]   Peck, *People of the Lie*, p. 25.

5. Overcoming and Preventing Engagement in Self-Deception

Collingwood, Fingarette and Burrell agree that self-deception enables us to pursue a particular course of action (or a manner of living) without having to suffer inner conflict and emotional turmoil: the self-deceiver does not simply avoid *truth*; the self-deceiver flees awareness of *painful truth*. Like the other approaches, proponents of the moral ambiguity approach also recognize that - by virtue of the very definition of the term self-deception - awareness of moral *right* does indeed exist at some point prior to engagement in self-deception. Rather than speculating on the particular intentions or motives of the self-deceiver, however, this approach is satisfied that the *avoidance of painful feelings* constitutes an adequate explanation for why an individual enters into self-deception. The focus admirably shifts to the problem of preventing or overcoming self-deception.

An understanding of self-deception as the *disavowal* from consciousness of those engagements which conflict with our values and ideals shows how preventing or overcoming self-deception requires the *avowal* of these engagements. This presupposes that we are both *willing* and *able* to bring into explicit consciousness painful emotions such as anguish, guilt, shame or fear. It is entirely possible that a person may be sincerely *willing* to avow engagements, but lack the wisdom and skills necessary to effect a transformation of consciousness. To be able to explain - to ourselves or to others - what we are doing, or experiencing, (or what we have *done* or *experienced*) is not as simple as we might first think. Especially if the motivation underlying actions is not fully comprehended.

Being able to *spell out* engagements presupposes a readiness to reshape identity. It is this intrinsic link between self-deception and identity formation which offers the clearest insight into what conditions must exist, and what skills are required to overcome or prevent entrance in* o self-deception. Within a framework for understanding the self as *story*, self-deception can be described as both (a) the purposeful avoidance of painful information (which we know *in our heart*, but refuse to make explicit in consciousness), as well as (b) an attempt to preserve a partial or false identity.

To learn the skills necessary to overcome or avoid self-deception, and to sustain an honest knowledge of self, we need a method suitable for an ongoing process of self-inquiry, capable of incorporating into a unified framework the full range of human experience we seek to avow in consciousness, acknowledge to others as part of who we are, and integrate into our self-understanding and master life story.

5.1 Meaningful Self-Disclosure: The Antidote for Self-Deception

In order to form and sustain a coherent understanding of self, or construct an integrated identity, three fundamental things are required. These were spelled out in the previous chapter as: (a) a master life story by means of which we can integrate information and make sense of our experiences; (b) the wisdom, conditions and skills required to make our experiences explicit in consciousness, and (c) the motivation and power to act in accordance with the beliefs and values contained in a master life story. These three general requirements for achieving an integrated identity are also the key ingredients in the recipe for an antidote to the poison of self-deception

5.1.1 SELF-DECEPTION AS A MISSING OR MEANINGLESS MASTER LIFE STORY

As was mentioned in chapter one, the type of outcome we envisage in our master life story has a major impact on our present emotional state, mental attitudes, and consequently, our behaviour and physical well-being. If a life story has a favourable outcome, the influence on the self will tend to be positive; if the outcome is unfavourable, the influence will tend to be negative. As David Burrell states, "Our ability to 'step back' from our deceptions is dependent on the dominant story, the master image, that we have embodied in our character."[30]

We need a story that allows us to recognize our failings and enables us to accept responsibility for those failings in a non-destructive way. But what if we can not find

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[30] Burrell, *Self-deception*, p. 95.

sufficient meaning and order in our lives? What if the outcome we envision for our life story is wholly negative? Burrell suggests that it makes perfect sense to view a process of denial or self-deception as a normal consequence of not having a master story capable of making one's experiences intelligible: "Self-deception is correlative with trying to exist in this life without a story sufficiently substantive and rich to sustain us in the unavoidable challenges that confront the self."[31]

With an understanding of self-deception as the disavowal of painful feelings from consciousness, and the insight that identity formation and self-understanding require a narrative structure, we can see that without a meaningful master life story capable of rendering emotional pain intelligible, a degree of denial or self-deception seems unavoidable. Being aware of the negative consequences of not having a meaningful master story, and recognizing our basic cognitive predisposition to be selective regarding what we choose to attend to, makes self-deception less perplexing.

Reading the inner hypocrisy, authenticity and vital lie approaches from the perspective of a dominant *life story* is revealing. The commitment to the goal of *survival* in the vital lie approach not only serves as the rational moral justification for self-deception, it may also point to the absence of a *master story* with the power to make the painful and tragic realities of one's life intelligible and *survivable*. Without a meaningful life story, one can grasp how engagement in self-deceptive, yet *self-maintaining*, strategies may be viewed as the morally-preferable course of action.

The inner hypocrisy approach, on the other hand, assumes that a *master story* with the power to make sense of the painful and tragic realities of one's life is virtually constitutive of being human: self-deceivers chose not to rely on their inate life story for selfish and sinful reasons.

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[31] Burrell, *Self-deception*, p. 88-89.

5.1.2 SELF-DECEPTION AND MISSING OR CORRUPT RELATIONSHIPS

Developing the necessary skills to embrace the reality of one's situation and avoid engagement in self-deception requires a dominant life story capable of giving intelligibility to painful feelings and harsh realities. It requires us to recognize and respect the fact that identity formation is not a purely personal affair. Viewing the human person as *relational* establishes the *social* character of a master story. It predetermines that the particular skills required by the individual to *avow* personal experiences will be primarily *interpersonal* skills. Overcoming or preventing self-deception cannot be separated from the process whereby we both reveal and discover ourselves in personal communication with others:

> *And it seems to be another fact that no man [woman] can come to know himself [herself] except as an outcome of disclosing himself [herself] to another person. This is the lesson we have learned in the field of psychotherapy. When a person has been able to disclose himself [herself] utterly to another person, he [she] learns how to increase his [her] contact with his [her] real self, and he [she] may then be better able to direct his [her] destiny on the basis of this knowledge.[32]*

Any theory of knowledge or self-awareness which overlooked the basic human need to engage in dialogical relationships with trusting others would fail to perceive how self-deception can result from the absence or corruption of such relationships. Coming to a truthful awareness of our limits and capabilities requires the affirmation and recognition of *self* and *other* within the context of human relationship: "The self is constituted by and continues to exist in relationship with others. People are social to the core. We can neither become ourselves nor know ourselves apart from our relations with others, and there can be no reality for us apart from these vital relationships."[33] But something else is required. It is not easy to trust ourselves to others:

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[32] Sidney M. Jourard, *The Transparent Self* (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1971), p. 6.

[33] Culliton, *Personal Presence: Its Effects on Honesty and Truthfulness*, p. 5.

Self-disclosure, however, requires courage. Not solely the courage to be, as Paul Tillich wrote of it, but the courage to be known, to be perceived by others as one knows himself to be. We can paraphrase the Delphic oracle who advised, "know thyself", and declare, "make thyself known, and thou shalt then know thyself".[34]

This brings us to a consideration of the third requirement for a healthy process of identity formation and r. .oral growth which avoids engagement in self-deception: *moral courage.*

5.1.3 SELF DECEPTION AND THE ABSENCE OF MORAL COURAGE

It is conceivable that we have both a master story capable of accommodating the full range of our experiences and still remain unable to avow those experiences. Such might be the case if we lack a *meaningful* master story, or if we find ourselves without *trustworthy* personal relationships to aid in this endeavour. A meaningful master story, and interpersonal relationships based on mutual love and care, are both essential if we are to prevent, or to overcome, engagement in *awareness-avoidance* strategies. What we need finally, is the courage and strength of will (a) to acknowledge those threatening engagements we find difficult to bring into consciousness, and (b) to live in accordance with our avowed beliefs and moral values. Avoiding the dynamics of self-deception requires a degree of moral courage to endure the suffering which invariably accompanies the acknowledgement of painful truths. And we need moral stamina to motivate us to *go on* to accomplish whatever such recognition may demand from us: "What the self-deceiver lacks is not integrity or sincerity but the courage and skill to confront the reality of his or her situation."[35]

Our view of the final outcome of our master story lies at the heart of our ethical and spiritual lives, and operates as a key motivating factor for moral action. If the outcome is tragic, if our master story concludes with an epilogue that *life is meaningless,*

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[34]   Jouard, *The Transparent Self,* p. 6-7.

[35]   Martin, *Self-deception and Morality,* p. 88.

then the moral stamina to act in accordance with our knowledge of what is truthful and morally preferable will be greatly diminished, and may significantly reduce our ability to endure suffering and pain, and hence, to escape the urge to engage in strategies of avoidance which can lead to, or constitute, self-deception.

Just as the character of a master story can motivate us to develop meaningful relationships within which we can discover both ourselves and others in mutual self-disclosure, so too can the act of self-disclosure and discovery in meaningful relationships lead to a more empowering, positive reformulation of our master life story. Overcoming or preventing self-deception requires such a dialogical process.

Summary

Developing and sustaining an honest understanding of self requires at least three things: (a) a master story through which we can integrate and make sense of our life experience; (b) the conditions and skills required to make our experience explicit in consciousness; and, (c) the motivation and power to act in accordance with the beliefs and values present in our master story. Self-deception can be understood as a normal consequence of not having a meaningful master story capable of making life experiences intelligible or the necessary *wisdom, conditions,* and *skills* to avow the full range of human experiences.

Self-deception must be understood as a dynamic process of knowledge and awareness evasion, which can only be properly identified and morally assessed in concrete situations using a theory formed around the centrality of narrative. Four approaches were examined. Each response attributed certain intentions and characterizations to the self-deceiver which were not empirically verifiable, but were inferred or deduced from the underlying philosophical beliefs and ethical theories present in each approach. There can be no verification of a general theory of self-deception from an abstract analysis of human intention; moral judgments on seif-deceivers are, therefore, not verifiable.

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All theories based on a metaphysics focused on the *sameness of an underlying substance* must be rejected. We need *experiential knowledge* as well as *abstract knowledge*, which no theory can offer by itself: knowledge about self which is grounded in personal and historical experience. It is necessary to view the self not as a static substance, but as a configuration of personal experiences and events woven together by the mind into a unified identity. The historical and contextual experience of the self-deceiver can, therefore, only be assessed within the structure of narrative.

The relational character of a narrative configuration of self (identity formation) predetermines that the particular skills and life changes we need to *avow* our experiences will be primarily interpersonal skills. Overcoming or preventing self-deception cannot be separated from the process whereby we reveal and discover ourselves in interpersonal communication. A meaningful master story and interpersonal relationships based on mutual love and care are both essential for generating the moral sentiment necessary to overcome or avoid entrance into self-deception. Just as the character of our master life story can motivate us to develop meaningful relationships, wherein we can both reveal and discover ourselves; so too can the act of revelation and discovery within the context of meaningful relationships lead to a more positive and power-giving reformulation of that story. Overcoming or preventing self-deception requires just such a dialogical process.

Deception can easily interrupt or prevent moral growth. The challenge is to uncover the fundamental psychological dynamics of self-deception and gain insight into what conditions or skills are needed to avoid or overcome engagement in evasive and self-deceived behaviour to thereby facilitate moral transformation and subsequent engagement in politically-responsible social change.

When cultural, economic and political conditions are such that facing certain truths results in emotional pain and psychological confusion for many people, it then becomes necessary to undertake a broader analysis of the dynamics of social ignorance in order to uncover the root source of much of what might - upon first glance - seem to be solely the personal faults and failures of individuals. This observation leads naturally to the study of social ignorance in the following chapter.